Fall Perennial Cutback and Leave-Standing Checklist

> **Companion Reference Sheet for:** When to Cut Back Perennials in Fall and Which to Leave Standing
> Save this PDF to your phone or print a copy for field reference. Planting dates vary by site and season. Check your local extension office for your area.

Key Takeaways

- Wait until frost and seasonal dieback make it clear which foliage has finished its work.
- Cut back blackened hosta and daylily foliage, and remove diseased plant material rather than leaving it in the bed.
- Cut peony foliage near ground level after frost, taking care not to damage the crown.
- Leave selected healthy seedheads and hollow stems for birds, winter structure, and overwintering insects.
- Keep ornamental grasses standing through winter and cut them back in late winter before new growth gets in the way.
- Check the plant's pruning needs before trimming hydrangeas or lavender.

Use frost, plant condition, and local timing to decide

Plant group	Cut after frost	Leave standing
Hostas	Cut blackened or collapsed foliage near the base after frost.	Leave foliage that is still healthy and green until it has died back.
Daylilies	Remove foliage that frost has blackened or collapsed.	Keep healthy foliage until it has finished for the season.
Peonies	After frost, cut foliage near ground level without cutting into the crown.	Keep the crown and any healthy basal growth intact while cutting.
Foliage with disease or pest damage	Remove clearly diseased or pest damaged material and dispose of it separately.	Do not leave affected foliage in the bed just to maintain winter cover.
Healthy seedheads and hollow stems	Remove selected seedheads if you need to limit self seeding.	Leave some healthy stems and seedheads for winter interest, birds, and possible insect habitat.
Ornamental grasses	Usually wait until late winter for the main cutback.	Leave standing grasses through winter for structure and crown protection.

Leave seedheads and stems for winter structure and wildlife

Task	Tool or action	Sanitation or disposal step
Cut healthy live stems	Use sharp bypass pruners to make a clean cut.	Brush soil and plant debris from the blades after use.

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Move between plants	Check blades before pruning the next plant.	Clean blades between plants, especially after cutting diseased material.
Remove diseased foliage	Cut affected leaves and stems without dragging them through healthy plants.	Dispose of diseased plant debris instead of adding it to a home compost pile.
Trim a plant near its base	Cut close to the ground only when that plant's care calls for it.	Keep the blades clear of the crown and any new basal growth.
Retain habitat stems	Choose healthy stems in areas that will not block paths.	Leave selected stems standing through winter and keep bed edges accessible.

Fall cleanup checklist and tool sanitation

Use bypass pruners for live stems and clean cuts. Bypass blades pass one another like scissors, while anvil blades press material against a flat surface; The bypass and anvil pruners page explains which style suits different cutting jobs.

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Field checklist

- ☐ ☐ Wait for suitable frost and local conditions before starting a broad fall cutback.
- ☐ ☐ Separate normal seasonal dieback from foliage with disease or pest damage.
- ☐ ☐ Mark late emerging plants so spring growth is easy to spot.
- ☐ ☐ Protect plant crowns and basal growth when cutting near the ground.
- ☐ ☐ Retain selected healthy seedheads and hollow stems for winter structure and wildlife.
- ☐ ☐ Clear paths and bed edges while leaving useful stems in less traveled areas.
- ☐ ☐ Clean pruner blades between plants and dispose of diseased debris appropriately.

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